

# Reading Aloud as Reflective Writing Practice: Lessons from Playwriting on Speaking and Listening

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## Abstract

Reading aloud is a common strategy when revising and proofreading a piece of writing. In the context of theater, however, it is a critical process for playwrights to continuously reflect on their work. I examine the roles of speaking and listening as straightforward but rich reflective practices by 1) describing a short case study of reading a difficult-to-read script, 2) discussing the value of speaking and listening in playwriting, and 3) imagining ways that CSTs can better support writers' reflective practices. I encourage researchers to consider writing as an embodied and sensory practice and to make room for incorporating speech into the reflection process.

## Keywords

reflection, reading aloud, speaking, listening, writing, playwriting

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## 1 Introduction

The last thing I do before I submit a paper is read the whole thing out loud. Before the C&C TAPS deadline, I paced around the apartment with my laptop cradled in my arms, reading the entire document top to bottom. After drafting and editing and writing and rewriting this paper for  $n$  hours over  $n$  months, this act of private performance felt both final and novel—it was probably my last time reading it for the foreseeable future, but it was my first time *hearing* it. I think I am safe in assuming that lots of writers will read aloud (or even listen to text-to-speech generations) as a tried-and-true strategy for proofreading and editing. However, I'd like to examine reading aloud from the perspective of theater, particularly playwriting, to understand it as an intentional and embodied reflective practice.

Reading aloud is a critical playwriting process. Plays are a unique writing discipline in that the words on their own are not the finished product; even the most polished script is still just a script, a blueprint for performance. Speech—along with movement, light,

sound, texture, and more—is how those words come to life, and so speech is a necessary part of the writing process itself. With this in mind, the most reliable and accessible method of reflection is simply to read it aloud, whether by actors, fellow playwrights, a group of friends, or yourself. Smiley and Bert say as much in their guide to dramatic writing: “The best way to test the dialogue is hearing the play read out loud” [4]. This has always been true in my own playwriting practice as well. An idea that looked just okay on paper was so much more moving once spoken; a tense scene that relied on well-timed silence seemed to fall flat in practice. I often don't discover what I'm trying to write about until I hear it.

To understand and question the role (and potential) of speech in writing practice, I draw from both my personal arts practice and my ongoing research with local playwrights. This position paper aims to:

- (1) Reflect on my own experience with reading aloud through a short case study
- (2) Discuss how and why reading aloud is a reflective practice through speaking and listening
- (3) Imagine possibilities for tools that help capture insights during the read aloud process

A brief disclaimer before we continue: although the names are quite similar, reading aloud is a very distinct practice from the classic technique of think-aloud. Think-aloud focuses on the verbalization of both verbal and non-verbal thoughts [3], whereas read-aloud focuses on the reading of text *verbatim*. The contexts differ, too: think-aloud is generally applied to evaluate usability, while I discuss read-aloud as part of the (creative) writing process.

## 2 Case Study: Reading Unintelligible Scripts from *Found Theater*

To set the stage, so to speak, I want to share an instance where reading aloud helped me reflect on my own practice—specifically in the context of a script that was *difficult* to read out loud.

I developed an artistic support tool [1] for playwriting called Found Theater<sup>1</sup>, which allows you to adapt anything into a play. Building on the tradition of found poetry, you write by uploading images (i.e., screenshots and photos already collected on your desktop) and selecting areas for an OCR engine<sup>2</sup> to extract text from. Whatever it recognizes, “accurate” or not, is added to the script. In practice, scripts become noisy, full of typos and gibberish interrupting what you “meant” to say. In other words, it is a tool for writing strange and interesting but often unreadable plays.

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<sup>1</sup><https://found-theater.vercel.app/>

<sup>2</sup>The tool uses Tesseract.js, which is a Javascript version of the Tesseract OCR engine.  
<https://tesseract.projectnaptha.com/>

Using Found Theater, I sat down to write a short script using partially curated, partially random materials: a screenshot from a game about outsmarting AI<sup>3</sup>, two excerpts from my favorite play, a results page from a WikiHow quiz, a snippet from a 2007 news article, and a photo of myself.<sup>4</sup> After around thirty minutes of fiddling with bounding boxes, I was left with an absurd scene where “STUDENT” considers their worth and value, “ZVERYONE” narrates, and “YOU” waits for them to come home.

As you can see in Figure 1, this script is riddled with typos! “I”s are replaced with “1”s and vertical bars, “yesterday” somehow became “Vecterday”, and “4,000” changed numeric systems to become “4.000”. One of the goals of Found Theater as a system is to introduce of noise and illegibility to encourage the reader-performer to make interpretive decisions. To get a sense of what this script could mean to someone else, I asked a group of friends to read it aloud, with one person as each character and another reading stage directions (the italicized text). I was surprised to hear them do their best to read the text verbatim, glitches and all. For example, the line “S50 C LOSE” was meant to say “so close”, but they read it literally as “ess-fifty cee lose”. As the writer, I knew what certain lines were “supposed” to say, but as readers, they simply read what was on the page. Our reaction to hearing these lines was almost always to laugh. The ache of wanting to “go home today” becomes the confusion of trying to “£0 home” instead, with a moment of us Americans fumbling over whether that says pounds or euros. I do think some of these typos can be course-corrected while reading silently. Perhaps I had expected my friends to do this, to predict what I was going for, but I’m grateful that they chose to read as written instead. We would not have enjoyed ourselves so much if we had not tried to read aloud verbatim. I had honestly thought the scene was a bit pretentious, so I wasn’t expecting it to make us laugh at the absurdity of what we were trying to read. Even if these computer-aided missteps did mean that most lines did not have their “intended” impact, I was glad for the new angle to work with and felt excited to lean into the weirdness after hearing it for the first time.

Outside of the humor element, the reading also revealed new ways of interpreting the same lines. One friend pointed out how, depending on where you are, 4.000 could be read as “four”, “four point zero zero zero”, or “four thousand”. Part of a playwright’s job is to remember that the actor is speaking, so any abbreviations or contestable words should generally be spelled out [4]. Writing with intentional (or undetected) gaps, then, means that the reader can impart new meaning on a line of dialogue. For a speculative piece like this which I did not necessarily intend to polish further, these interpretations were generative. Committing to one reading of “4.000 years” meant potentially changing the timescale of this play by several orders of magnitude, after all. Reading aloud reveals how even a single word can have many variations that subtly or overtly shift the meaning of a line, the tone of a scene, or the stakes of a play.

<sup>3</sup><https://deviationgame.com/>

<sup>4</sup>I did not wind up using this in the script, but I left it onscreen to watch myself at work...

### 3 “Does this sound good?": Reading Aloud as Reflective Practice

The primary goal of reading aloud is to **learn something about the text that you did not learn from reading it silently**. The playwright who reads aloud is like the chef tasting their food, or the seamstress trying on their garment, or the dancer watching themselves in the mirror. It is the artist experiencing their art through a different sensory channel, often aligning more closely with the “final product” of their work (the dish, the clothes, the performance), in hopes of learning something new about it. Reading aloud can be understood as the processes of *speaking* and *listening*, each of which plays its own part in reflection.

#### 3.1 On Speaking

“A sentence is also a sound unit” [4]. Speaking text aloud transforms it from one medium (written language) to another (spoken language) each of which has its own unique affordances. When the writer is the one speaking, they ask themselves, “what needs to be preserved across this medium transition?” Speaking presents a moment for us to reflect on what it is that we are actually trying to say when we write. For instance, take the closing line of the Found Theater scene: “We’ll see each other soon.” This line means something different if I interpret it as excited (“it really will be soon”), or bittersweet (“it might be a long time, but I believe it will happen”), or hopeless (“it’s an empty promise, we won’t see each other again”), or annoyed (“I wish we wouldn’t”). Reading it aloud *once* can help reveal the emotion I naturally gravitate towards. Reading it aloud *many times*, with these multiple inflections, allows me to reflect on the range of interpretations that an actor might have. Rather than try to prescribe just one specific reading of this line, which is nearly impossible to do through written text, the speaking exercise helps me consider how to write the preceding lines to guide the performer towards the emotional response I’m hoping for. It is often the case that “the playwright himself becomes the actor in the act of writing” [5], using their own body to practice the text.

#### 3.2 On Listening

Listening to speech helps playwrights answer the ever-present question of “does this sound good?” This comes with the question of what we think makes a piece of writing “good,” and therefore what we are *listening for*. In the introduction example, where I read a paper aloud to proofread, I’m listening for typos, grammatical errors, and redundant or meaningless turns of phrase. In the Found Theater example, I’m listening for moments that are different from what I had imagined. In my more conventional playwriting, I’m often listening for coherency: does it make sense that the character reacted to the previous line in that way? These are aspects of writing that are somehow easier for me to detect through listening rather than reading. To me, much of this comes down to the sensory experience of hearing. Merleau-Ponty writes how you cannot “decompose a perception, to make it into a collection of sensations, because in it the whole is prior to the parts” [2]. When the writing is meant to be spoken, I cannot try and understand it through text alone. Listening allows the playwright to hear the text outside of their own body and experience it in a phenomenally different way.

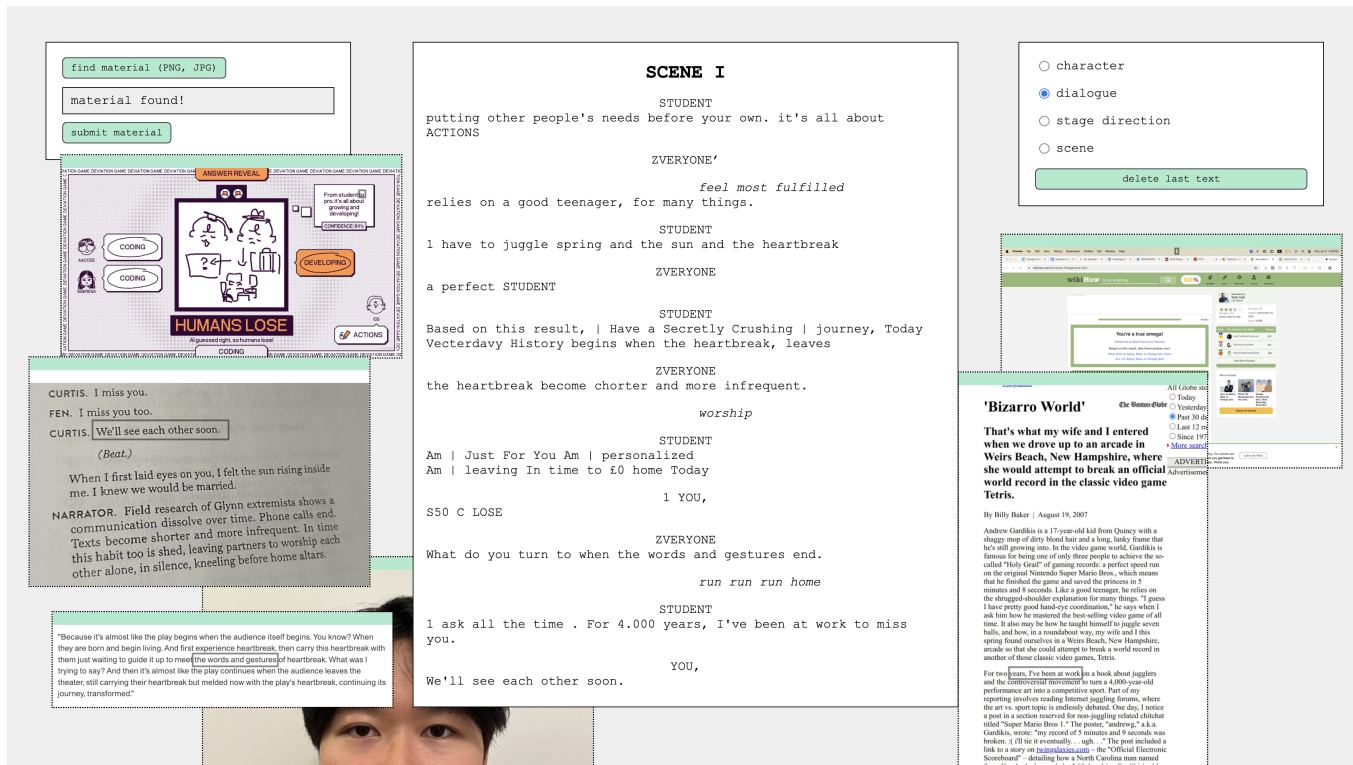


Figure 1: A short scene written in Found Theater. The script features the characters STUDENT, ZVERYONE, and YOU, and it is surrounded by the materials I used to write it.

Through reading aloud, playwrights are engaging in a constant cycle of reflection, where *the production of text is validated through rehearsal*. Plays and performance art are a remarkably well-tested writing domain, where artists go through innumerable rounds of speaking and listening to ensure that the work is saying what they mean for it to say.

#### 4 Imagining Tools for Reading Reflection

With all of this said, there is a distinct lack of tools that support the process of reading aloud or the reflection that comes with it. To contextualize how we might consider building tools for reading aloud, let's examine some of the potential contexts in which it happens.<sup>5</sup>

- Solo: Unlike the following cases, the playwright reads to themselves. This kind of reading is often partial, focusing on a difficult section or scene rather than an entire script.
- Reading groups, writing workshops, or classes: a group of playwrights reading each others work and giving feedback. Typically focuses on a single scene.
- Staged reading: involves actors and audience but limited movement and stage design. Typically features an entire play or well-contextualized excerpt that is in development, and the playwright looks for reactions and feedback.

<sup>5</sup>These are broad characterizations of different phases of play development that I have encountered in my own practice and my ongoing research with playwrights. They are not intended to be rigid definitions.

- Rehearsal: involves actors within the production process of a full work. Playwright may be involved if invited, and they may make notes for potential changes to future scripts.

Across these different scenarios, playwrights are managing many different streams of input: peer feedback, audience responses, actor interpretation, director notes, personal reactions, and more. In many cases, playwrights keep track of their notes by writing on physical copies of a script or typing in a digital copy. However, as the speaking is happening, taking detailed notes means splitting your attention between what you're writing and what you're hearing. Information inevitably slips through the cracks as it becomes difficult to multitask. How, then, might tools support writers in speaking and listening?

Tools might *support text readability*. Writing software often optimizes text for printing, which (contrary to intuition) is not always aligned with reading. Apart from increasing text magnification, there are very few easy-to-apply supports for making text on a screen easier to read. Tool developers might consider offering the ability to *quickly and temporarily adjust* qualities like typeface, font weight, text and background color, text spacing, line width and height, and surrounding whitespace for the purpose of reading. For scripts in particular, differentiating characters by color or texture could help readers visualize when it's their turn to speak. Introducing these supports can particularly help writers who have less comfort or familiarity with technology to take advantage of digital tools that can support them.

Tools might *help identify what text is currently being read*. As a script is read aloud, the playwright needs to keep track of the current line; if they pause to write a note, it can be difficult to catch up in the moment. Tool designers could alleviate the playwright’s split focus by “listening” for what part of the script is being read at the moment and highlighting it, or marking the current position in the document like an audio playback bar.

Tools might *make it easier to return to specific moments*. Because the read-aloud content is often a scene or less when a play is in early stages of development, it can sometimes be enough to remember that you had a comment on a certain line. On paper, this is done easily enough by circling, underlining, or otherwise marking a note. Digitally, though, this can be harder. Making a comment in something like Google Docs can be a disorienting series of hovers and clicks, and text modifications like underlining or bolding can be difficult to identify later. Tool designers might introduce something like a *digital bookmark*: a low-impact electronic equivalent to dog-earing a page that doesn’t rely on text selection at all.

Tools might *help record verbal reflection*. Given that speaking is such an integral part of writing, perhaps writing tools might incorporate voice notes as a way of recording line readings or verbal feedback on the fly. The ability to quickly record a snippet of audio could both speed up the note-taking process and ensure that less information is lost in transcription. While speech-to-text and text-to-speech tools exist, I would like to advocate for tools that keep speech *as speech* and keep text *as text* while allowing the two to live alongside each other.

## 5 Looking Beyond Playwriting

In writing this, I wanted to use my experience with playwriting practice and research to share my feelings about reading aloud as a useful, accessible, and impactful way to reflect on your work while you write it. Now, I want to highly encourage writers *outside* of theater to embrace this as a reflective tool. I recognize that it is a pedestrian thing to recommend, but even simple techniques deserve our attention and care. By sharing these possible design directions, I hope for more researchers to consider the role of speech in the embodied act of writing. Our voices are our most humble and most powerful tool.

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